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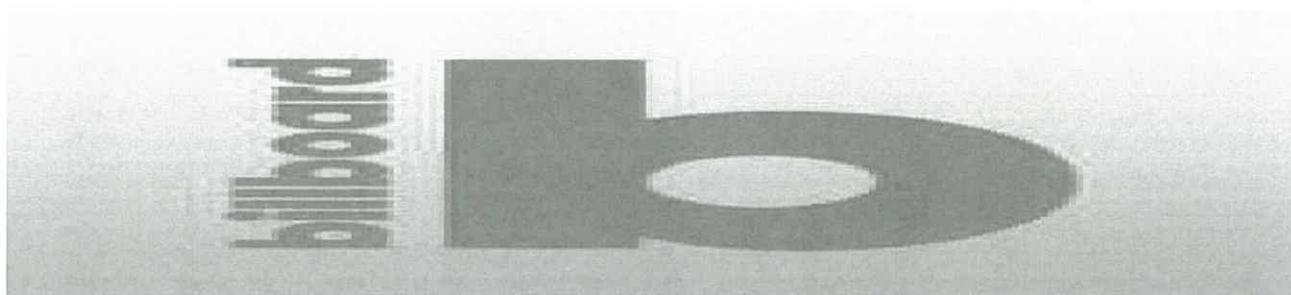
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REVIEW

Ed Sheeran, 'x': Track-By-Track Review

6/23/2014 by Jason Lipshutz



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From the start, Ed Sheeran has demonstrated a skill for shrugging off the conventions of mainstream pop while still managing to enjoy its successes: His breakthrough radio single focused on a crack-addled prostitute. "The A Team," from Sheeran's debut album, "+" (pronounced "plus"), cloaked its harrowing subject matter in a sensual melody, a nifty trick that has helped the 23-year-old British singer-songwriter transition from pub-playing troubadour to arena act in roughly three years. The accented yearn of his vocal delivery distinguishes him from other aspiring folkies, but Sheeran's real gift lies in his writing -- his lyrics' attention to detail and unorthodox phrasing in particular. As the title implies, "x" (pronounced "multiply"), Sheeran's highly anticipated follow-up, ups the ante from his debut. He sinks even deeper into feelings of love, jealousy and inebriation while trying to navigate pop superstardom -- a problem this album is sure to only amplify.

To that end, "x" looks like a smash. Every song synthesizes the catchiest qualities of "The A Team" and its follow-up hit, "Lego House. "Bloodstream" flaunts a soulful naivete over the most delicious guitar lick on the album, while "I'm a Mess" builds into an anthemic ending that will surely cap off Sheeran's future live show. As the hooks intensify, Sheeran paradoxically spends much of the album trying to hide -- from the bright lights that make his eyes squint with intoxicated confusion, but also from unnamed women who endlessly frustrate him. There's a reason Sheeran name-checks two Bon Iver songs on separate tracks; throughout the album, he attempts to spin his heartbreaks into an empathetic cry for shambling twentysomethings. "Loving can hurt sometimes/But it's the only thing that I know," he concludes on "Photograph," which lets its careful piano keys and acoustic strums simmer until arena-size drums kick in.

Ed Sheeran: The Billboard Cover Story

The daring spirit at the heart of Sheeran's appeal is magnified here, and he outclasses other rising male singers simply by utilizing a deeper bag of tricks. Few artists could pull off as stark a transition as the leap between "Sing," a swaggering, Justin Timberlake-inspired dance track, and "Don't," a blue-eyed-soul hymn built around the line "Don't fuck with my love." Elsewhere, Sheeran raps like The Streets' Mike Skinner on "The Man" and crafts a new-school wedding jam with "Tenerife Sea." Such wild swiveling never feels forced, or even unexpected, from Sheeran, who has proven his exacting musicality onstage. There, he uses chopped-up loops, but few ideas get repeated on "x."

Sheeran seldom lets his songs breathe, packing each second with syllables even when he's not spitting bars. But that overeagerness will likely be tamped down, as Sheeran continues to polish his impressive craft. "x" finds a hungry artist doing everything possible to elevate to another level, simply by abiding by his instincts. After arriving on the U.S. pop scene with an offbeat folk ballad, Sheeran is expanding his profile on his own terms.

Which songs on Ed Sheeran's "x" are the highlights? Check out our track-by-track review of the new album.

1. One

One
Ed Sheeran

"All my senses come to life/when I'm stumbling home as drunk as I have ever been," Sheeran sings, letting each line spill over into the next. Perhaps most impressively, Sheeran lets a note linger for 17 seconds at one point! 

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2. I'm A Mess

I'm a Mess

Ed Sheeran

Sheeran is still stumbling, but on "I'm A Mess," he demonstrates a classic folk voice and sensibility. The songwriter is not trying to screw up a semblance of happiness, and with a deceptively simple arrangement, he keeps matters as uncluttered as possible.

3. Sing

Ed Sheeran - Sing [Official Video]



The Pharrell-produced, Justin Timberlake-influenced jam was at one point not considered to be the album's lead single -- how is that possible? Even those who hated on "The A Team" and "Lego House" have to surrender to this suave pop bullseye.

4. Don't

Don't

Ed Sheeran



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Positioned on "x" right after "Sing," "Don't" shows that Sheeran is not afraid to be dangerous, or even explicit, on his sophomore set. There's some Jason Mraz-y rapping as Sheeran details a relationship that deteriorates due to touring and mistrust, as he seethes, "I never saw him as a threat/Until you disappeared with him to have sex, of course."

5. Nina**Nina**

Ed Sheeran

Following the quick name-check of Stevie Wonder and Bon Iver's "Re: Stacks," Sheeran once again tries to hide away from the world with a girl, but the (music) world keeps pulling him away from love. With descending piano notes and a rollicking pop hook, this one should be earmarked as a future single.

6. Photograph**Photograph**

Ed Sheeran

"Loving can hurt sometimes/But it's the only thing that I know," Sheeran opens on "Photograph," presenting the lynchpin line of the whole album. Over a few hesitant acoustic strums, Sheeran tiptoes forward with some restrained crooning before the arena drums kick in.

7. Bloodstream**Bloodstream**

Ed Sheeran

"Bloodstream" features a delicious guitar line and a virtuoso performance from a defeated Sheeran, who asks "How'd I get so taqued?" before pleading to not be left alone. There are disturbing references to alcoholism and gospel vibes, and while Sheeran's narration has never felt so vulnerable, his songwriting is rarely this self-assured.



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8. Tenerife Sea

Tenerife Sea

Ed Sheeran

On an album filled with romantic uncertainty, "Tenerife Sea" induces chills with straightforward emotion, as Sheeran begins the waltz of the chorus by repeating, "So in love, so in love."

9. Runaway

Runaway

Ed Sheeran

The sassy soul of "Runaway" sounds like the perfection of the idea John Newman hatched on "Cheating," but the looped vocal snippet is Sheeran's specialty. This one is going to pop when presented live.

10. The Man

The Man

Ed Sheeran

Miss The Streets like we do? The uneven "The Man" will provide some sort of Mike Skinner fix, as Sheeran spits, "I'm just disgusted with the skeletons you sleep with in your closet," in a way that helps the line almost make sense. The bluesy hook saves the day, to some extent.

11. Thinking Out Loud

Thinking out Loud

Ed Sheeran



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The standard track list of "x" ends with a sleek update of Marvin Gaye's "Let's Get It On," with Sheeran declaring, "Darling, I will be loving you till we're 70!" His voice pushes this bold stab at romance past its sappiest moments, and ends the album on a likable note.

- Album Review

4 STARS

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